

Prayer:

Lord, we bring before you our hearts and minds in thankfulness that you came to us as a human being to share life with us and to save us from sin and death. Open us to your message and love. Amen.

Isn't our church beautiful this season? The garlands, poinsettias, bows, wreaths and candles all help us feel festive. We all get excited seeing the lights in our neighborhoods, the shiny decorations in stores, the silly antlers and red noses on minivans. There's always a charge in the air as Christmas comes closer. People smile more, chat in the long lines, and are happy to check the mail knowing there may be more than just bills tucked in the box. I love the season for all these little things. And I am okay with putting all the cards and bows and ornaments away knowing how happy I'll be to see them again in about 11 months.

We've all heard the clichés about keeping Christmas in our hearts all year long and remembering what and who Christmas is all about. Some churches, including ours in past years, use the title "Christ-Mass" which is closer to the Middle English spelling and is probably used as subtle reminder to us to remember where our priorities should lie. There are magnet bumper stickers about "Keeping Christ in Christmas," and people who lament that Christmas has become all about gift giving and getting the latest toy or cell phone. Even Lucy in the Peanuts comic back in the 1960s noted that Christmas has become a "big commercial racket." It's nothing new. And all those sayings about Christmas lasting all year *are* just clichés, overused phrases that have come to be almost meaningless. Some people even say that Christmas shouldn't be a holiday. That's just silly. The word "holiday" comes from the words "holy" and "day." But that word, too, has lost its meaning.

It doesn't help that now, just a few days after Christmas, we are back in the first few verses of John's gospel, and through the rest of the winter and spring we'll follow Jesus' adult life in Luke's gospel. Christmas is a time of birth and all the joy that comes with welcoming a baby into the world. But we'll be jumping pretty fast into Jesus' preaching and gathering disciples, and before we know it, it will be Palm Sunday when we walk with Jesus to His crucifixion. I don't mention all this to put a damper on our festive celebration of Christ's birth, but that is part of why we celebrate his coming to Earth, isn't it? He came not to live a long life and die after years of preaching and building communities of faith, but to get things started, and then to die to save the world from sin.

That might be part of why it's so hard to keep the spirit of Christmas going for long after the decorations have been put away. Epiphany will last only six short weeks, and then Lent will be here. Easter barely gets us through May, and then it's on to the longest season: Pentecost. By the time we reach the fifth Sunday of Pentecost, we're halfway back to Advent. I don't say this to get everyone in a panic that 2010 is over before we've celebrated New Year's Day, but just to show why Christmas is so hard to hold onto. We only get two Sundays after Christmas day to celebrate, while all the other seasons are minimally over a month long.

This doesn't mean we shouldn't try to keep the joy and peace and love of Christmas with us through the rest of the winter, spring and summer. My mom used to break out her favorite Christmas album on June 25th as a mark that we were halfway back to the holiday. If I hadn't grown up in the hot Tucson desert, she probably would have turned the oven on and baked a batch of spritz cookies. But even the Muppets singing "Silent Night" in the middle of summer vacation, it wasn't easy to keep remembering that Santa, and God, were always watching to see how we were behaving.

I encourage everyone to live beyond the clichés, to just smile more and be happy knowing God is in you and in everyone. Know that we have to put away the decorations so we can be excited to see them again next year. Know that all the people who needed help and charity won't cease to need those even when it's not dark and cold out. Know that every baby who is born will grow up to suffer, laugh, live, love and die. And that's okay since one baby came to save all the rest of us and give to us the best gift of all, one that's with us every day of the year— life everlasting in Him.

Ending Prayer:

Lord, we thank you for all the gifts of this life, gifts that can't be wrapped and opened, broken or lost. Help those who seek your blessings, light the flame in their hearts that illuminates all good things. Keep this light alive us in all. In your name we pray. Amen.